NO GREATER LOVE

May 24, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 27:2-6
John 15:1-17

"Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one's life for a friend." —John 15:13 (Inclusive Language Lectionary)

My proposal to you this morning is either the most important one you have ever heard or it is the silliest. It is from the final conversation Jesus had with his disciples just before he died. The proposal is that the highest potential to which you can aspire, the most profound and deep joy you can hope for is related directly to your willingness to love. This idea is not as simple as it seems. It suggests that the way to be happy in life is to stop trying to be so happy. It suggests that the way to be fulfilled is to forget about your own fulfillment and worry about someone else's. It is the unlikely suggestion that this life lived for others... is the highest and best any of us can be, and that the greatest love of all is a love so "other directed," so utterly selfless, that it is willing to lay down its life for a friend.

My proposal to you, which is either the most important or the silliest you have ever heard, is that while we are genetically programmed for survival, we have a spiritual potential for something far greater. The Biblical proclamation about us is that this spiritual potential is our crown and our glory; it is what makes us children of God, a little lower than the angels, given dominion - which means trusteeship - over the rest of the created order... It is the very essence of our religion that when we move from living for our own survival, to selfless living - dying for others, Christ lives in us.

Consider what he said... "I am the vine, you are the branches." ... and... "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." ...and... "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one's life for one's friends."

It is an appropriate day to consider this proposal. Memorial Day invites us to remember and to honor those who have died in the service of their country. So we look back and for everyone of us there is a special memory of a dear one who did not come home. Collectively we do not have to look further back than last week when 37 young American sailors died in a

missile attack of their ship in the Persian Gulf. It is an appropriate day to consider the proposal because about this incident and for most of the other military deaths in recent years it is not possible to invoke the more traditional rationale of defending one's homeland or even fighting for freedom. Platoon was the best motion picture of the year precisely because it did not back away from that issue. Platoon is a harsh and violent movie but it is a beautiful movie, perhaps a spiritual movie, because it conveys what the bravest have always known, and that is that ultimately people die for one another and not political goals or philosophical abstractions: that even when the cause is ambiguous at best and at worst, wrong, brave men and women keep dying, essentially because they are in it together and they cannot and will not betray one another. The highest, noblest life to which any of us can aspire, that is to say, is what Jesus said it was... "Greater love has no one than this..."

That is the meaning of what happened in the Persian Gulf last week. And it is at the heart of this most important or most silly proposal that life is full when you love enough to think of others, in effect to lay down your life for them. "I will live in you when you love like that," he promised... Christ in us... the light of the world - the true life - the life of God - in us, in that greater-than-any-other love, living and dying for others.

Did you ever notice how the people who love you live in you? Ever notice how you live for the people you love, how your deepest love actually organizes your life, regardless of what else you think is going on? Ever notice how your parents live in you: how the older you get the more you sound like your mother or father? Sometimes I say something to my children and think to myself "That's my father talking!" There is something of that here. Jesus said "when you love one another, I will live in you."

The situation in which he said this to his friends does not appear at first glance to be very promising. It is certainly not very cheerful. It is the Last Supper. The atmosphere in the upper room is heavy with tragedy about to happen. Betrayal and arrest lie immediately ahead. Jesus is saying things like, "Where I am going you cannot follow." For three years or so he had shown them what it means to be alive. They were not, I think, more altruistic than we are. They were not better people. They didn't walk away from their homes and jobs because of a philosophic abstraction, or even a theological truth. They were disciples because being with him made them feel more alive than anything they had ever done. They had begun really to live. They had actually begun to live this radically new life for others. They had been "born anew" in the very process of laying down their lives. Words like freedom and joy had new meaning for them. It was profoundly good to be with Jesus of Nazareth, and now he was telling them it was about to end. "Cut off from me you can do nothing," he had said, and cut off from him they most certainly were about to be. How, then, to live? How to continue to live with this new life, depth, intentionality and joy - when he was no longer there?

"I am the vine... I continue as the source of the life in you."

The vine, by the way, was a powerful image for them. The prophets, had described Israel as the vine. God's vineyard was the nation. The old

coin of the realm had an image of a vine. An ornate and beautifully crafted golden vine with clusters as tall as a man, was one of the ornaments that adorned the inside of the Jerusalem Temple. They may have seen that beautiful artifact earlier that very day. The vine was an important symbol of their identity as God's people. But now Jesus was saying "I am the vine - you are the branches - I am the source of the new life in you..."

This is not easy going. The proposal is complex... but it is perhaps the most important thing he ever said...

May I reconstruct it one more time? One... Jesus promised that life in him is life characterized by something he called "fullness of joy." Whatever that means, and I believe it is fairly clear, - it means that the life in Christ is not somber, staid, repressed - nor is it superficially, trivially - "everything is wonderful" happy... It is a profoundly happy life... "fullness of joy."

Two... it is a life "driven" by love for others, instead of love for self. Get the twist? It is life motivated, propelled, driven - not by the desire for happiness which is what drives most of us most of the time, or the drive for security, or power - but by the desire for someone else's happiness.

That is the key, the Christian secret. In striking contrast to what the world proposes and nature seems to teach, Jesus declares that we are children of God, fully human, and profoundly joyful when we live for something other than ourselves.

There is practical truth here. It may seem a silly suggestion sometimes - that to live you have to be willing to die, but there is, I think, a body of experiential evidence. About ten years ago, Norman Cousins, the distinguished editor of Saturday Review published an account of his illness in the The New England Journal of Medicine. The title of the article which became a widely read book was "Anatomy of an Illness." It is a fascinating account of Cousin's recovery from a crippling and irreversible disease, and the unusual therapies he and his physician devised to wage the battle. In the process of writing the book Cousin's had a great deal to say about life - healthy, full life, and about a quality of living that translates into vitality and vigor and something akin to what Jesus called "fullness of joy." In a particularly good chapter on Creativity And Longevity he describes in detail the two men whose example and whose friendship helped him in his struggle with illness - Pablo Casals and Albert Schweitzer. Both men led vigorous and full lives into their nineties. As Cousins pondered their example he concluded that both of them were driven by a passionate love affair with life, that they were deeply and passionately committed to something outside themselves, some great cause whose benefit accrued to others - Casals to beauty in music and, in his later years, to world peace; Schweitzer to healing, health.

We are learning from the well-elderly that one of the ways to stay well is to stay alive and the only way to stay alive is to care about people and causes and ideas other than self. I quoted four retired friends

of mine last week who wrote an essay on retirement in which they expressed anger because their retirement was forcing them to spend their days worrying about themselves, fussing about their own well being and they were discovering that when you are forced to worry about yourself - there is always something to worry about... that when the elderly seem to be obsessed with what appears to be essentially selfish concerns, - aches and pains, medicine and food... it is because we have deprived them of anything else to worry about. "We don't grow old," they said. "When we stop growing we become old." There is experiential truth in Jesus' suggestion - that joy and fulfillment is connected to love and love is essentially laying down life - living for the other or others.

Parents know it. Beginning with birth itself, with the pain of labor, there is the absolute reality of putting one's life on the line. The best of parenting in fact, is putting the welfare, happiness, health, life of that child before your own. Someone did that for every one of us. And it continues as a life task. Parents continue to parent as long as they live. Garrison Keillor said that to a class of college graduates last week. He told the graduates to be grateful that their parents worried about them, that they would always worry about them, that even as they sat there in caps and gowns their parents were worried about whether they had a clean handkerchief in their pockets, whether they were pressed, tucked in and properly combed. Thanks be to God that someone once put our welfare before their own. Thanks be to God for saints who are still worrying about us!

The best parenting knows how to love by denying self - ultimately by withdrawing when the time comes, by letting go... by voluntarily changing the relationship so that the beloved child is free to walk away... Alan Paton wrote about it, poignantly, to his own adolescent son, on the occasion of his confirmation...

"Go forward, eager - child, see here I begin to take my hands away from you, I shall see you walk careless on the edges of the precipice, but if you wish you shall hear no words come out of me; my whole soul will be sick with apprehension, but I shall not disobey you... Go forward, go forward, I hold the bandages and ointments ready." [Robert Raines, The Faithing Oak, p. 34]

The best of human friendship knows the truth of it. Brave men die in foxholes not for ideology but for the buddy beside them. A colleague told me last week, about her ministry with a young man with AIDS. She is the only one who knows. For many understandable reasons no one else can know yet. So she has begun to prepare to be with him and for him. She has gone to a seminar and learned what she needs to know and discovered the networks, the doctors and nurses and hospice and support group. She will be with him and for him...

Christ is in that. The incarnation happens when life is lived for others and the very best of our humanity is in it too.

The world needs the reminder. As a matter of fact, my deepest conviction is that the world's need is desperate in this regard. The world is operating on the basis of very different assumptions. It is in

comparison to the world's assumptions that Jesus' suggestion and my proposal to you sounds silly.

The world assumes that fullness of joy is what happens to you when you enhance and enrich and enlarge your life and celebrate your own self and, best of all, reward yourself with the "stuff" of the world. The world assumes, teaches, honors and celebrates that life's noblest purpose is getting as much as you can and then protecting what you have accumulated. Time Magazine devoted much of its recent issue to the current ethical malaise in our culture. We have become accustomed to being lied to and ripped off by high officials in our best institutions. What is wrong with us, Time asked, and then offered a series of thoughtful articles and essays. The cover article - reported that the clarion call of the day is "Enrich Thyself." Politically we have concluded that success in business is the major criteria for national leadership. One of the sad products of this mentality is wide-spread "insider trading" which Time calls the "gospel of wealth run amuck." The provocative Time essay lectured that the point at which personal fulfillment eclipsed duty in this culture, something very important came unraveled. The "Me" generation became the "My" generation. Personal fulfillment became the goal and the process, the measure of all things. "Does it make me feel good - does it compute - will it earn interest - will it serve me?" From the most intimate human relationships to the most public policy our culture is flirting with moral disaster in its obsession with individual fulfillment. In human sexuality, when one's own fulfillment replaces the fulfillment of the other, sex is no longer sacrament but the medium for selfishness. In public life, when the obsession with personal profit obliterates any commitment to the common good - we have moral anarchy reflected in the appalling growth of white-collar crime... street crime costs the nation four billion dollars a year. The cost of white collar crime is 40 billion. That's moral anarchy. That's rampant greed.

The other assumption our culture makes is that it is better not to love anything so passionately that you become personally vulnerable. Not long ago, in youth culture, it was regarded as hopelessly square to love anything, particularly one's parents and family, school or nation. I think we're growing out of that, but the gospel of selfishness does suggest cool, detached, self-sufficiency as a better model than passion and vulnerability. So Jesus' suggestion that true life happens when you love enough to die for something sounds pretty silly, and pretty naive and pretty irrelevant...

Until you see it, that is: until you experience it: or when God's Holy Spirit grabs you by the scruff of the neck and shows it to you in some gorgeous act of selfless grace or some magnificent life of such truth that you cannot ignore it... And you know, that's just what the Christian story within the human story is all about. That the human self is never greater, more noble than in selflessness; that in dying to self, true life emerges. Mother Teresa's living for the dying in Calcutta, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer's martyrdom at the hands of the Nazi's, or Martin Luther King somehow knowing that his trip to the mountain was the last one - or on back in history - St. Ignatius of Antioch on the road to his death as a martyr saying "Now, I am beginning to be a disciple"... or those contemporary lives, those modest examples of people living unselfishly, for other people, scattered

throughout our common life like precious leavening. You find a lot of them in churches and volunteering to do the work no one else will do. You find them tutoring and serving meals to the homeless and visiting in the jails and carrying food to the homebound and reading to the blind. You almost have to look for them because you see, they are truly not interested in anyone's knowing about them; they have grown beyond living for self, even the emotional gratification which results when others applaud this selflessness... They are learning to live for others - which always means dying a little - which Jesus promises is where fullness of joy is truly to be found.

And it is where he will be found. "I am the is where fullness of joy is truly to be found.

And it is where he will be found. "I am the vine - you are the branches..." He died for those men around that table. He died, at least in part, so that they would live and grow and become and pass on to the world this most important of all proposals - that we live when he lives in us. He went out and did it. He laid down his life for his friends. He died for us.

One of the most powerful passages in all of literature is the conclusion to For Whom the Bell Tolls. Ernest Hemingway was not a traditional believer... but he could never ignore or escape the God who I believe pursues all of us, and the Gospel is never far, in one form or another, from what he wrote. In this conclusion Robert, the hero of the novel, is fatally wounded by the Fascists during the Spanish Civil War. Maria wants to stay and die with him. Hemingway wrote profoundly about the glory of our humanity and at the same time, I believe, about the unexplainable mystery of Christ living in us. (His characteristically terse writing became, in the middle of this passage, biblical/liturgical).

"'Now you will go for us both,' Robert said. 'You must do your duty now. Now you are going well and fast and far and we both go in thee... Now art thou doing what thou should. Now thou art obeying. Not me but us both. The me in thee. Now you go for us both. Truly we both go in thee now. This I have promised thee.'

"She started to look around. 'Don't look around' Robert Jordan said. 'Go.' And Pablo hit the horse across the crupper with a hobbling strap and it looked as though Maria tried to slip from the saddle but Pilar and Pablo were riding close against her and Pilar was holding her and the three horses were going up the draw.

"'Robert,' Maria turned around and shouted, 'Let me stay! Let me stay!' 'I am with thee.' Robert Jordan shouted, 'I am with thee now. We are both there. Go!' Then they were out of sight around the corner of the draw and he was soaking wet with sweat and looking at nothing." [See, The Magnificent Defeat, The Me in Thee, Frederick Buechner]

Jesus said, "love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, - that one lay down one's life.." and -

"These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that

your joy may be full" - and -

"I am the vine, you are the branches..."

It is either the silliest or the most important idea you will ever hear.

Thanks be to you, O God
for those who have loved us more than they loved themselves.

Thanks be to you, O God
for your son, who loved his friends more than he loved his own life.

Thanks be to you for
his death, in which they and we are given life.

Thanks be to you, O God,
for your eternal love revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.